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# **North Yemen: Chronic Instability at Riyadh's Back Door**

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**An Intelligence Assessment**

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*NESA 82-10176  
May 1982*

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# **North Yemen: Chronic Instability at Riyadh's Back Door**

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## **An Intelligence Assessment**

*Information available as of 4 May 1982  
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

This paper was prepared by [ ] of the  
Office of Near East-South Asia Analysis. It was  
coordinated with the National Intelligence Council  
and the Directorate of Operations. Comments and  
queries are welcome and may be addressed to the  
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**North Yemen:  
Chronic Instability at  
Riyadh's Back Door**

**Key Judgments**

Neither President Salih nor any successor is likely to bring stability to North Yemen in the foreseeable future. Deep-seated ideological, tribal, and religious animosities prevent North Yemeni leaders from constructing a broad political base. Meddling by outside powers aggravates Sanaa's problems. At best, Salih will continue to maintain his precarious balancing act, playing off internal rivals and external forces.

The Sanaa government is now struggling against the National Democratic Front insurgency, which is backed by radical Arabs and the Soviet Union. Although North Yemeni forces have scored some important gains recently against the insurgents and the NDF's political appeal appears limited largely to the southern areas of North Yemen, a protracted struggle that saps North Yemeni resources ultimately may increase the regime's susceptibility to leftist influence and subversion. Moreover, an attempt by Sanaa to decisively defeat the NDF on the battlefield would increase the possibility that major South Yemeni forces would join the conflict.

The Aden regime, though divided over how much military support to give to the insurgents, is united in its view of North Yemen as a security threat and a potential prize. Moscow, meanwhile, is pursuing a dual policy of supplying arms to Sanaa and covert aid to the insurgents with the aim of increasing Soviet influence and leverage in North Yemen regardless of the outcome of the conflict. Control over the government in North Yemen would give Aden and, in turn, the Soviet Union substantial leverage over Saudi Arabia and weaken the US position in the entire region.

Saudi Arabia, alarmed by the scale of the fighting in North Yemen over the past year, has reluctantly decided to increase support for Salih. Riyadh's principal goal is to strengthen the Sanaa regime as a buffer against Marxist-oriented South Yemen. But the durability of the Saudi commitment is questionable. The Saudis distrust Salih for his turn to the Soviets three years ago. They may again look for an opportunity to undercut him and strengthen his political rivals if he goes through with a new arms agreement now being negotiated with Moscow.

Saudi appeals to the United States for help in supporting North Yemen against the insurgents are likely to persist. If Washington is perceived as unresponsive, Saudi confidence in US policy, already at a low ebb because of what Riyadh regards as Washington's failure to restrain Israel and US insensitivity to the threat from Iran, may erode further.

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## Geopolitical View of North Yemen



□ Soviet influence  
□ US military relationship

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## North Yemen: Chronic Instability at Riyadh's Back Door

### North Yemen's Strategic Value

North Yemen is subjected to pressures and blandishments from the superpowers as well as from its neighbors because it borders on Saudi Arabia, the world's leading oil exporter, and is adjacent to the Red Sea route between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. The struggle for predominance in Sanaa by Saudi Arabia and Soviet-supported South Yemen contributes to North Yemen's chronic political instability.

The US stake in North Yemen mainly results from US interests in Saudi Arabia. Saudi leaders view North Yemen both as a strategic buffer against Marxist-oriented South Yemen and as a potential long-term threat. Their worst fear is that the two Yemens will unite under leftist control. The Saudis fear that a radical, Soviet-supported regime in Sanaa would revive irredentist claims to Saudi territory and exploit the presence of the more than 1 million Yemenis in Saudi Arabia to subvert the royal family. Thus, Riyadh looks to the United States to help it prevent a leftist takeover in Sanaa.

The Soviet Union seeks influence in North Yemen in part to gain leverage over Saudi Arabia and to weaken the US position in the region. Moscow hopes to undermine Western access to Persian Gulf oil resources and to secure its own access. Moreover, while already having paramount influence in South Yemen and Ethiopia, Moscow would like another close ally to offset the expanding US military relationships in the region with Egypt, Somalia, and Oman.

In addition, the Red Sea is important to both the USSR and the West, which use it to make commercial and military shipments to the Indian Ocean-Persian Gulf region. The Red Sea provides a shorter and less costly route than the alternative around the

tip of southern Africa for Moscow to ship arms to its many African, Persian Gulf, and Southeast Asian clients from its principal ports on the Black Sea. The Soviets also seek to establish naval access to North Yemen to help monitor maritime traffic between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. About 25 percent of the oil shipped to Western Europe and the United States from the Persian Gulf travels by way of the Red Sea.

### Internal Strife

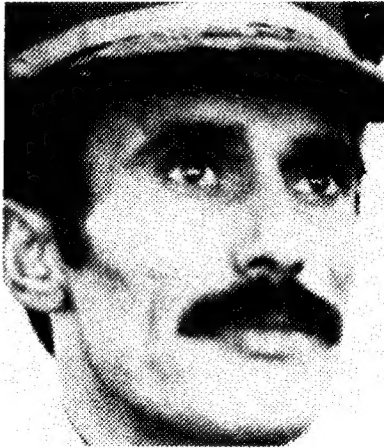
North Yemen has been wracked by civil war, military coups, political assassinations, and a continuing insurgency since the republic was established in 1962. It is not one country, but three: the Shafii (Sunni Muslim) south and west coast, the Zaydi (Shiite Muslim) north, and the Sanaa central region. No leader has ever been able to control all three areas.

Shafii tribes, resentful of longstanding Zaydi domination of the Sanaa government, traditionally have looked more to Shafii South Yemen than to Sanaa for leadership. Aden has exploited these bonds to organize and direct the insurgent National Democratic Front. Despite Zaydi control in Sanaa, Zaydi tribes in the north look as much to Saudi Arabia as to the central government. Riyadh, in turn, traditionally has used its leverage to influence the rulers in Sanaa. Two staunchly anti-Communist tribal confederations in the north are able to mobilize large armies to influence political events in Sanaa and periodically to participate in fighting Front insurgents.

### Salih's Success

President Salih has survived in power for the last four years by balancing the competing tribal, religious, and political factions and external forces. His immediate predecessor lasted nine months and the one before that three years.

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Middle East Economic Digest

North Yemeni President Salih [REDACTED]

Salih, like those he succeeded, ultimately relies on the military—the strongest and most modern institution in this underdeveloped country. He has placed relatives in key military and security positions and developed an effective network of informants. The President acts—often ruthlessly—against domestic opposition. Personal loyalty, not competence, is the key to survival. Salih recently withdrew operational control of the National Security Organization from its Deputy Director because he was suspected of developing a personal following. The pro-Saudi Armed Forces Chief of Staff was also replaced with a strongly pro-Soviet officer with no independent power base. [REDACTED]

### The NDF Challenge

Before 1981 Salih regarded the Saudis and their North Yemeni allies as his primary political adversaries. That changed last summer, however, when the NDF scored several successes over North Yemeni military forces, securing virtually complete freedom of movement throughout the southeastern countryside and allowing it to step up assassinations, propaganda, and weapons distribution. [REDACTED]

The Front, officially established in January 1979, comprises several dissident groups united more by expediency and opposition to Salih than by a shared

ideology. Backed principally by South Yemen, Libya, and increasingly by Syria, the NDF's Marxist-dominated leadership is dedicated to gaining control of the government in Sanaa, eliminating Saudi and Western influence in the Yemens, and eventually uniting North and South Yemen. The leadership has already established an apparent government-in-exile [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The Front also is demanding important cabinet posts in the Sanaa government. [REDACTED]

The intense fighting that began last June has been interrupted only long enough for each side to resupply and reposition units or to probe for weaknesses in its adversary's political position. Both the NDF and government forces can claim local victories, but the cost in casualties has been high. Moreover, the sustained fighting so near the border increases the possibility of clashes between North Yemeni and South Yemeni regular forces. [REDACTED]

To offset its losses in manpower, North Yemen has committed an increasing number of units to areas of the heaviest fighting. It also has assumed a more aggressive military posture and appears determined to operate against the Front near the South Yemeni border despite Aden's sensitivities. [REDACTED]

President Salih also has sought foreign aid to strengthen his position. [REDACTED]

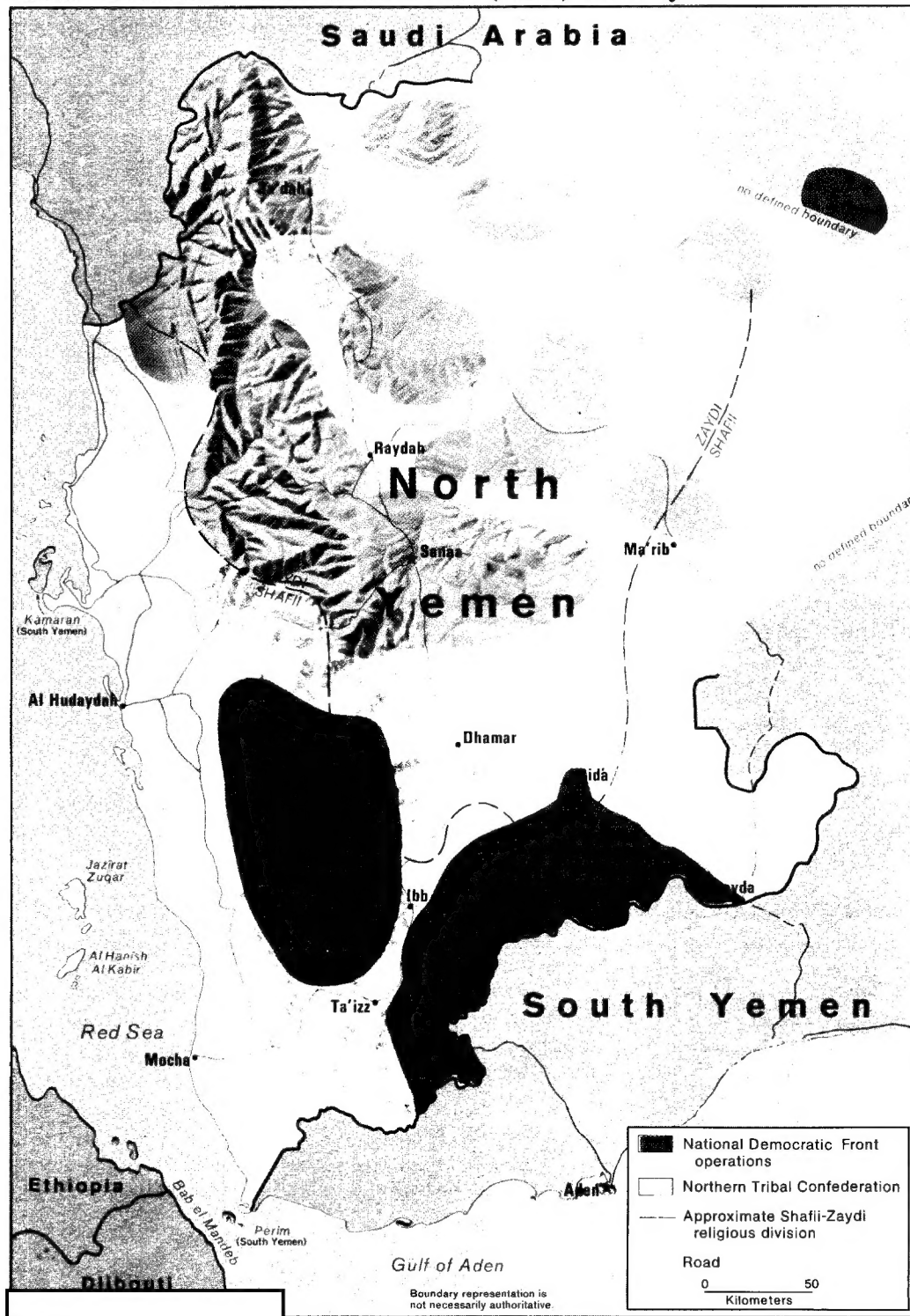
For its part the NDF [REDACTED] is relying more heavily on the direct participation of South Yemeni Army and People's Militia units. The Front also is receiving increasingly sophisticated Soviet weaponry as well as support from Syria. [REDACTED]

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# Areas of National Democratic Front (NDF) Activity



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**Saudi Maneuvering**

Riyadh, alarmed by this turn of events, has reluctantly decided to increase support for Salih in the near term [REDACTED]



Keystone Press ©

South Yemeni President al-Hasani [REDACTED]

In addition to budgetary and development aid Saudi Arabia finances US military equipment and training assistance for North Yemen. [REDACTED]

immediate threat subsides. Similarly, Salih probably will put more distance between himself and Riyadh if his immediate need for Saudi military aid diminishes. [REDACTED]

**The View From South Yemen**

Aden views North Yemen—which has more resources than South Yemen and almost four times the population—both as a potential threat and a long-term prize. Control over North Yemen would give Aden substantial leverage over Saudi Arabia and deny US access to North Yemen. South Yemen is convinced that the US access agreements with Oman and Somalia are designed to encircle it and that the establishment of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force is a direct security threat. It also alleges that the United States and Saudi Arabia are behind the recent attempt to sabotage power installations in Aden. [REDACTED]

The Saudis have also sought other foreign assistance for North Yemen. During the latest clashes Saudi Crown Prince Fahd and Defense Minister Sultan appealed for increased US support. Riyadh proposed joint Saudi-US counterinsurgency training assistance as well as a public gesture of support. Saudi Arabia also urged moderate Persian Gulf states to pledge increased financial aid during Salih's tour of Arab states in February. [REDACTED]

Salih, we believe, has tried to exploit Saudi fears of increasing NDF, South Yemeni, and Soviet influence in Sanaa to get more aid while at the same time attempting to assuage Saudi concerns about his reliability as an ally. Perhaps more importantly, he has temporarily neutralized the Saudis' key North Yemeni allies and his potential rivals—the northern tribes. Still, Riyadh distrusts Salih, in large part because of his continued dealings with the Soviets, and as in the past may back away from him if and when the

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### The Soviet Angle

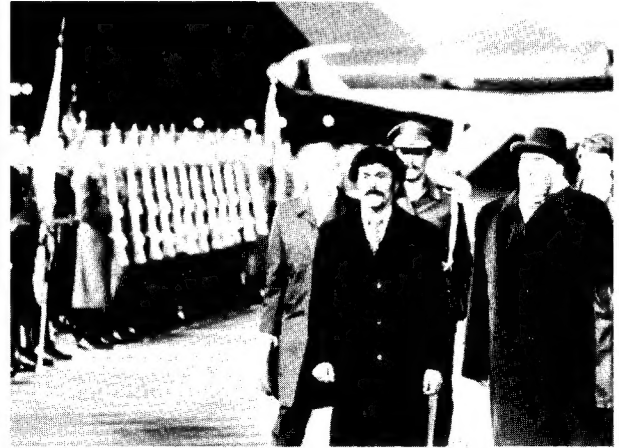
North Yemen has traditionally invited Soviet assistance to balance other outside pressures. In 1928 and 1956 conservative North Yemeni leaders turned to Moscow to counter British influence in the region. Since 1962 North Yemen has used the USSR to offset Saudi influence. Disillusioned with Saudi manipulation of deliveries of US military equipment, Sanaa concluded its largest arms deal, worth more than \$750 million, with Moscow in 1979. [redacted]

North Yemen obtains most of its arms—more than it can absorb—and some development aid from the USSR. Approximately 700 Soviet military technicians train North Yemeni forces, and an additional 125 Soviets provide support on economic projects. Some 1,200 Yemenis are undergoing training in various military academies in the Soviet Union. [redacted]

Salih visited Moscow for the first time last October, when the Soviets reportedly agreed to reschedule Sanaa's \$600 million arms debt and to accelerate arms deliveries under the 1979 accord. Negotiations apparently were begun for additional types of sophisticated weaponry requested by Sanaa, including surface-to-surface missiles, which would increase the number of Soviet advisers in North Yemen. Most Soviet training and arms—including MIG-21s, SU-20/22 fighter-bombers, T-54/55 tanks, and SA-2 and SA-7 air defense missiles—however, are unsuited for counterinsurgency operations in North Yemen's rugged terrain. [redacted]

### The Soviets

[redacted] probably believe that, with proper preparation, the NDF Marxists will be able to dominate other factions within the Front after gaining



Sovfoto-Eastfoto ©

North Yemen's Salih in Moscow, October 1981 [redacted]

power. In the interim the Soviets hope that by simultaneously aiding North Yemen and the Front they can increase their leverage over Sanaa. [redacted]

Soviet and US aid programs are in direct competition in North Yemen. The Soviet Union has provided much greater quantities and types of arms and trained more Yemeni military personnel than the United States, but US-supplied F-5 aircraft are regarded by the North Yemeni military as its most effective weapon against the NDF. On the economic side the Soviets have concentrated on large projects to gain favor in Sanaa. The United States provides slightly more economic aid than Moscow but has not gained as much recognition in part because of strong pro-Soviet sentiment in the largely Soviet-trained North Yemeni media. Overall US influence in Sanaa is also limited because North Yemenis associate Washington with Saudi manipulation of military and financial assistance to North Yemen and perceive a pro-Israeli tilt in US foreign policy. [redacted]

### Outlook

President Salih's need to balance competing internal and external forces to survive will prevent him from broadening his political base. Saudi Arabia, South Yemen, and North Yemen are locked into a pattern of

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lingering suspicion and antagonism. The Salih regime has survived only by playing one side against the other. North Yemen probably will be able to fend off the military threat from the NDF with infusions of foreign military aid, especially ammunition, spare parts, and specialized counterinsurgency training. North Yemeni forces recently have made some important gains against the insurgents. But a protracted struggle, sapping North Yemeni resources, ultimately may increase the regime's susceptibility to leftist influence and subversion. [REDACTED]

Covert NDF and pro-Soviet infiltrations of Sanaa's military and intelligence apparatus may represent Salih's most serious long-term threat. The tactics Salih uses to survive in power promote internal distrust and provide opportunities for the Front to exploit disaffection. The Front can also capitalize on traditional North Yemeni resentment of Riyadh. [REDACTED]

The Front appears to have serious weaknesses of its own that reduce the likelihood that it will soon gain control of the Sanaa government. The Shafii sectarian base of the Front leadership probably limits its appeal, and at the same time Shafii tribal leaders appear increasingly fearful of Front intentions. Shafiis in some areas have facilitated NDF incursions; others have openly opposed the Front. The Front's internal divisions open it to exploitation by Salih. [REDACTED]

#### **Implications for the United States**

The continuing struggle in North Yemen must be seen against the backdrop of events elsewhere in the region. The Saudis' confidence in American policy is at a low ebb as a result of what they regard as a US failure to restrain Israel. They see this turn of events as strengthening Arab hardliners and making it more costly for Arab moderates to maintain close relations with the United States. [REDACTED]

The US purchase of Iranian oil has raised new doubts about the dependability of US support against Iran and its radical Arab allies, Syria, Libya, and South Yemen. Uncertainty about American policy toward the Persian Gulf had begun to appear earlier because of Israeli support for Iran and US unwillingness to supply arms to help Iraq stave off defeat. [REDACTED]

If the United States responds weakly to Saudi appeals for help in strengthening North Yemen, Riyadh's doubts about US reliability might harden into conviction. In a worst case, Saudi leaders might consider adopting a more genuinely nonaligned policy to protect themselves, even if this meant improving relations with Moscow in exchange for Soviet restraint of not only South Yemen and the NDF but also Syria and Libya. Riyadh probably then would revert to its previous emphasis on using tribal allies in North Yemen to promote a friendly but weak government in Sanaa. [REDACTED]

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